Precipitating state failure: Do civil wars and violent non-state actors create failed states?

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This article examines whether the incidence of civil wars and the presence of violent non-state actors have an effect on state failure. Research on failed states has thus far prioritised armed conflicts as one of the key causes of state failure. This study challenges that claim and posits that civil war incidence has limited impact on the transition from fragility to failure. Global quantitative analysis of state failure processes from 1995 to 2014 shows that although armed conflicts are widespread in failed states, civil violence does not lead to state failure and large numbers of failed states become engulfed by civil war only after the failure occurs. By contrast, this study demonstrates a direct link between the presence of violent non-state actors and state failure.

This article seeks to explain whether the incidence of armed conflict and the presence of violent non-state actors increase the likelihood of state failure. As failed states are increasingly analysed through the lenses of security dilemma, or security gaps, the incidence of civil war and the involvement of extra-state veto-players became synonymous with the persistence of state failure. Research on failed states posits that armed conflict is conducive to state failure and that many failing, or collapsing states, are engulfed in civil wars. Somalia, South Sudan, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone and Central African Republic are some of the most recent examples of conflict-affected failed states. While there has been no lack in claims that not all civil conflicts lead to state collapse, the literature on failed states has thus far disregarded the cases of "cold state collapse", or failed and failing states without active intrastate conflicts. Zimbabwe, Togo, Nigeria,[i] Guinea, Haiti and a number of other states with an experience of state failure were not affected by civil wars during their episodes of state failure. Similarly, not much attention has been paid to failed states with marginal civil conflicts. Amongst other failed states, Myanmar, Sudan and Uganda faced insurgencies contained to remote regions. Other collapsed states – for example Ethiopia – only briefly experienced episodes of civil violence. All of the above suggests that the causal claim about civil violence's relationship with failure is not all-encompassing. Furthermore, research on failed states has thus far offered limited explanation about the relationship between civil war and state failure. Do states fail because of civil violence? Does the incidence of civil conflict ensure the continuity of state failure?

Systematic large-N analyses on the impact of civil wars upon the state failure are notable by their absence.

This study challenges the literature on the linkage between civil war and state failure, and posits that states do not fail or remain failed due to civil violence. Civil conflict is an unfortunate, but not an inseparable attribute of failed states. States fail or remain failed not because of, but despite civil conflict. Bearing in mind the instances of "cold state collapse" along with cases of marginal civil violence, internal violence is not an inseparable attribute of state collapse. [ii]The literature on failed state recovery has demonstrated that many states tend to overcome failure irrespectively of ongoing civil violence.[iii] A case-study literature has shown that states manage to recover from failure even while armed conflicts are still raging.[iv]

The causal linkage between state collapse and armed groups is closely embedded into the theme of civil violence in failed and failing states. Existing literature on failed states emphasises the central role of violent non-state actors (VNSAs) – particularly rebel groups – in the emergence and continuity of failed states. Conventional wisdom in international relations and political studies postulates that governments in failed states lose control over the monopoly on violence allowing non-state actors to proliferate and to fill in the power vacuum. The usual suspects of state failure are rebel factions, warlords, terrorist groups, criminal networks and other types of armed groups. The presence of VNSAs in failed states is almost always synonymous with the incidence of civil violence and intrastate conflicts. Although case-driven empirical accounts on the critical role of non-state actors in state failure are plentiful, little is known as to whether the presence of armed extra-state groups, such as pro-government militias or paramilitaries, has a systematic effect on the global phenomenon of state failure.

How does the presence of extra-state actors affect the risk of state failure? The other theoretical assumption proposed in this study is that regardless of the occurrence of civil violence, the presence of VNSAs is potentially conducive to state failure. These non-state agents are not necessarily rebel groups, or terrorist organisations, which (in)directly challenge the state authority, as posited by previous studies,[v] but various factions pursuing agendas similar to the state while remaining outside of the government's direct control, or lacking legal status. Pro-government militias (PGMs), regional warlords, political factions within the government, but not in opposition to it, civil movements and other pro-government agents might be expected to undermine the state from within without having to challenge it directly. The presence of VNSAs might be conducive to civil warfare,[vi] but they also prosper in countries not affected by intrastate conflicts.[vii] This study argues that the presence of violent non-state protagonists either in fragile and failing, or in already failed states, contributes

towards (and reinforces) the phenomenon of state failure. With the bulk of literature on failed states focused exclusively on anti-state agents (rebels, etc.), it is erroneous to exclude a wide range of pro-government elements from the dimension of state failure. Similarly to rebels and other anti-government veto-actors, armed pro-regime power-brokers are as capable of destabilising the state as their anti-regime opponents.

From civil war to state failure

Much has been written about the definition and taxonomy of failed states. Over the past two decades, a voluminous body of literature has been produced to define and classify the phenomena of state fragility, failure and collapse.[viii] In consequence, a myriad of definitions and measurement criteria created by both scholars and policy practitioners either replicate each other or "use the results of the analyses (which are based on the independent variables) to describe the concept being studied—that is, the dependent variable".[ix] In order to circumvent definitional and taxonomic debates as to which characteristics a failed state should (or should not) have, this study understands state failure in terms of the loss of state capacity to maintain its monopoly on violence and, most importantly, to fulfil "the requirements of statehood".[x] These requirements are understood in broader terms of inability to provide welfare, security, control its borders and represent its population. This study defines a failed state in terms of two mutually-dependent temporal processes: state *fragility* and state *failure*. A state is defined as fragile as it approaches failure. A fragile or failing state is described as on the verge of failure,[xi] but still retaining basic prerequisites of statehood. A failed state by contrast can be equated to Rotberg's[xii] collapsed state: a mere shadow of a nation-state that has lost control over its territory and most of its institutions. Failure occurs in political, economic and social spheres.[xiii] A failed state no longer provides its citizens with basic public goods, including human security, and it is no longer satisfies the Weberian criteria of a nation-state.[xiv]

Scholars have sought to present state failure as a continuous process, evolving through mutually reinforcing stages. For example, Rotberg[xv] envisions state failure in terms of three interrelated processes: weakness, failure and collapse. Similarly, Bilgin and Morton[xvi] trace how political regimes downgrade from rogue to failed states. Of primary concern here is not the typology or definitional debates in research on failed states, but the causes of state failure. As long as a state fails to satisfy the basic criteria of statehood and therefore crosses a thin red

line between state fragility and failure, distinctions between failed and collapsed states,[xvii] or between weak and failing states,[xviii] become of secondary relevance.

Previous research on state failure has tended to evolve from two interrelated theoretical strands. While the first set of explanations prioritises political factors (instability, institutional weakness, armed conflict), the other strand of state failure theories focuses on economic issues (poverty, financial crises, etc.). Amongst political causes, civil violence, or "domestic anarchy"[xix] has been emphasised as of primary importance. In Rotberg's[xx] statement: "[i]n most failed states, government troops battle armed revolts led by one or more rivals." In the same vein, Iqbal and Starr[xxi] insist that "both civil war and international conflict increase the likelihood of state failure, with civil war displaying a significantly stronger impact." The importance of civil strife for state failure is echoed not only in studies that directly explore the phenomenon of civil war,[xxii] but also in works on security gaps in failed states[xxiii] and security dilemma.[xxiv] Similarly, studies on state capacity and structural causes of state failure tend to incorporate the argument on civil violence in their theoretical frameworks.[xxv] For instance, according to Call,[xxvi] states fail because of capacity, security and legitimacy gaps.

Centrality of civil violence to state failure is explained by the failed states' loss of capacity to control their own territory and to provide the population with essential public goods, such as human security and basic welfare services. As soon as the central governance collapses, "domestic anarchy" pervades state institutions,[xxvii] undermining social order and subverting human security. Due to the state's inability to restore the law and order, societies are expected to break down along ethnic, sectarian and/or kinship lines.[xxviii] As posited by the state failure theories,[xxix] civil violence emerges prior to or alongside state collapse and its persistence further weakens the state capacity and legitimacy. Thus, owing to civil violence, descend into chaos and the loss of territorial control become almost unavoidable in failed states. Empirical evidence to support these claims was found in abundance from recent examples of civil war-affected failed states across the world. For example, Rotberg[xxx] describes Zimbabwe as one of the rare examples of a failing state not affected by civil violence. The majority of other recent cases of state failure demonstrate a seemingly obvious linkage between the state demise and civil war. Although the question as to whether civil conflict precedes state failure is still heavily under-researched, the consensus in the literature is that it is the civil war incidence that encourages the transformation of failing, or fragile, states towards a complete failure.

The precursors of failure: Violent non-state actors

The incidence of civil strife in fragile states is closely associated with the emergence and rise of VNSAs. Existing research on failed states presents the relationship between state collapse and the VNSAs as fairly straightforward. The state weakness encourages the rise of opposition, in the form of rebel groups, warlords and terrorist organisations. Most of these groups, directly confront the state authority and contribute towards the decline of state control. In early studies on failed states, rebel groups were traditionally identified as principal agents of state failure.[xxxi] The strength of insurgents is expected to increase in parallel with the decrease of state authority. In failed states, armed groups not only succeed in taking control over the large swathes of territory from the state, but they also manage to completely eradicate the central government – provided the VNSAs' failure to establish a centralised system of government – replacing it with rival (semi)paramilitary gangs.

Research on the relationship between state failure and terrorism began flourishing in the aftermath of 9/11. A large and growing number of studies examined the connection, or the lack thereof, between the emergence of international terrorist organisations and failed states.[xxxii] The hypothesis on failed states functioning as harbours of terrorism has been defended and rejected by numerous studies.[xxxiii] Bearing in mind that the appearance of terrorist organisations in failed states is seen primarily as a consequence of state failure rather than its cause,[xxxiv] terrorist groups commonly occupy only a marginal role amongst other agents of anarchy.

Along with rebels, militias, warlords and criminal organisations are identified in the literature as key agents of state failure.[xxxv] For instance, Marten,[xxxvi] as well as Malejacq,[xxxvii] proposes treating warlords as fundamental stake-holders in failed states. There is no lack of research on militias in failed states. Klare[xxxviii] argued that "a state's capacity to resist failure can decline rapidly when armed militias emerge or the official security forces break up into semi-autonomous bands." Similarly to the classical arguments on the role of anti-government insurgents, it was posited that "militias tend to compete with one another for control of territory, population, and resources—thereby subjecting the country to recurring bouts of violence and disorder".[xxxix] There is no agreement, however, as to whether the presence of militias and paramilitaries has a direct effect on state failure. While some scholars argue in favour of the connection between the militia presence and state failure,[xl] others insist on the opposite.[xli] As a result, the role of militias and other pro-regime VNSAs in state failure remains critically under-researched.

It is noteworthy that, as in Klare's[xlii] presentation, militias and other violent non-state agents are understood to function either instead of governments or in direct opposition to the regime.

The perception of VNSAs as anti-government and anti-state is firmly embedded not only in existing research on state failure,[xliii] but also in broader IR theory.[xliv] In accordance with the classical definition of non-state actors,[xlv] such groups are expected to retain a high degree of independence from the government. In Vinci's[xlvi] explanation, VNSAs are autonomous armed groups (AAG) "completely autonomous and independent of the state and not subject to its authority whatsoever." Since AAGs exist in opposition to governments, their emergence and presence is synonymous with civil violence. Civil war is employed by non-state armed groups as a tool of weakening the state and crippling its authority.

The major problem with the literature on failed states, civil war and VNSAs is that little attention is given to the role of alternative explanations and the probability that neither the incidence of civil violence, nor the perception of VNSAs as AAGs, offer an exhaustive explanation of state failure. Along with the perception of VNSAs as a symptom of failure, the rise of armed group is often portrayed simply as a sign of failing states. Although it has been empirically observed that the majority of civil war-affected states do not fail and that not all failed states are hosting civil conflicts, few efforts were made to systematically examine these counterarguments to the classical theory of state failure. Far less attention has been paid towards the understanding of VNSAs as a diverse group consisting of both anti-government and pro-regime components.

In order to ease the above detailed lack of definitional clarity, this study proposes defining violent non-state actors as *a heterogeneous group not only composed of armed actors on both sides of the dyad, but also of groups pursuing their own agendas that neither contradict the goals and objectives of governments nor directly align with them*. Along with pro-regime militias, paramilitaries, warlords and armed wings of political groups, this definition covers organised crime syndicates, private military and security companies, as well as a broader range of mercenaries.[xlvii] Regime opponents or rebels are also a type of VNSAs. Nevertheless, it is essential to draw boundaries between anti-regime extra-state actors and pro-regime, or neutral VNSAs. While there is a large and growing number of studies about rebels and governments in failed or fragile states, little is known about non-state actors remaining outside the two-actor dichotomy. Unlike rebels, VNSAs exist and operate not only during the episodes of armed conflict, but also in times of peace. Loyalties and allegiances of VNSAs shift along with political and economic developments and the boundaries between regime opponents and supporters are constantly blurred. Even for those VNSAs that are clearly allied with either the government or rebels, the linkage is often informal and obscure.

Theorising the impact of civil wars and VNSAs on state failure

A seminal work on failed states by Rotberg[xlviii] identifies the bulk of developing states with the incidence of civil war as potentially failing. Most scholars agree that it takes more than the presence of civil conflict to initiate the process of state failure and a number of structural factors are commonly cited in literature on state failure as instrumental to complete the transition from a condition of failure to complete collapse.[xlix] Notwithstanding the effect of economic and structural causes, civil war is still a central pillar in theories of state failure. This study does not seek to challenge the existing literature on failed states and the main thesis here is not to reject the importance of civil violence as a cause of state failure. Instead, this article suggests that civil war is not directly conducive to state failure and that fragile states engulfed by civil conflicts do not necessarily descend into "domestic anarchy" and succumb to collapse.

Apart from the well-publicised cases of state failure in Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia, the linkage between civil violence and state failure is far from obvious in the majority of other failed states. In Ethiopia, Guinea, and Angola, civil wars were either short-lived or were terminated well before the event of state failure. In Myanmar and Sudan, civil wars raged only in remote parts of the country and the government retained in firm control over the most of its territory. Much in contrast, India – a country known to host as many as eleven civil wars at the same time[l] – has never even been close to state failure. Zimbabwe, Togo, and Nigeria did not experience civil violence during their episodes of state failure. Contrariwise, Rwanda and Uganda have managed to overcome civil conflicts, but remained failed for years afterwards. Iraq had entered the category of failed states in the aftermath of the US invasion and, regardless of ongoing civil war, has managed to exit the list of failed states a decade later. Similarly, Afghanistan's failure is associated with Soviet invasion.[li]

A list of countries with the longest and most lethal civil wars, such as Colombia, Sri Lanka, Philippines and Indonesia, despite the incidence of widespread and protracted civil conflicts, have never crossed the line between fragility and failure. In some cases, such as for example Nicaragua's Contras war, Cambodian civil war or the ongoing conflict between Colombian government and leftist guerrillas, civil violence was widespread across most of the country. In each of these cases, governments lost an effective control over large areas of their territory. These states, nevertheless, avoided the failure and – despite the persistence of violence – some even managed to overcome fragility.

All of the above hints towards a strong endogeneity of arguments on causal connection between civil conflict and state failure. In other words, civil strife is more likely to follow state failure and to emerge as its consequence than to function as its cause. Of course, large-scale civil conflicts culminating with regime opponents successfully overpowering the government are not impossible. Yet even the case of rebel victory is not necessarily synonymous with state failure, and the success of opposition has not always led to Somalia-type outcomes. Regime collapses in Cuba, Nicaragua, Haiti, Egypt and Georgia, did not lead to state failure, as they did in 2011 Libya, or in post-Siad Barre Somalia. Despite a connection between civil war and state failure, a global pattern is hard to observe. While civil violence is a highly probable – but not inevitable – consequence of state failure, the incidence of civil wars does not provide an exhaustive explanation as to why some fragile states fail and others do not. In other words, civil conflict is neither a necessary nor sufficient for state failure. Civil wars thrive in failed states due to the state weaknesses, but the occurrence of civil violence in fragile states is far from indicative of state failure. With all of the above in mind and in order to advance our understanding of the relationship between civil war and state failure, this study proposes testing a null hypothesis that rejects the centrality of civil violence for state failure. Thus:

H1: Civil war violence does not increase the likelihood of state failure.

Having argued that civil war incidence is not the cause of state failure leads us towards the second component of theoretical argument. Violent non-state actors are necessary attributes of nearly all failed states. In one form or the other, VNSAs exist in the majority of failed states, contributing to state weakness and actively engaging in civil violence. This study posits that VNSAs function as precursors of state failure regardless of the incidence of civil violence. In line with the arguments on the loss of state control and state monopoly on violence,[lii] this paper suggests that the emergence of extra-state agents with license on violence is one of the key indicators of imminent state failure. As soon as VNSAs start proliferating, the explosion of violence becomes a matter of time and the state failure occurs not necessarily due to the start of civil violence, but owing to the inability of governments to provide human security and to maintain its monopoly on violence.

Most importantly, the emergence and presence of VNSAs in fragile states is not concurrent with civil violence. In Rwanda, pro-government Hutu Interahamwe militias appeared prior to the start of Rwandan genocide in 1994 and before the collapse of Juvenal Habyarimana regime. Similarly, the proliferation of both pro- and anti-regime clan militias in Somalia preceded the

outbreak of Somalian Civil war and the fall of Siad Barre. Given that the state failure does not occur overnight, but instead evolves through a series of stages,[liii] the emergence of VNSAs may signal another step of transition towards failed state. In 2011 Libya, armed militias appeared during the civil war against Gaddafi's regime and well before the state failure. Nearly all of these militia groups supported the post-Gaddafi government.[liv] Just as in case of Somalia, Libyan militias vastly contributed to the collapse of state-building in post-Gaddafi period.

Existing research on armed non-state actors has shown that most rebel groups and other anti-government elements emerge either on the eve of civil violence or in the midst of it with the primary goal of challenging the regime.[lv] Expanding the concept of VNSAs beyond regime contenders enables to include a broader range of actors. These extra-state elements are not exclusively anti-regime actors. Along with rebels and other counter-establishment agents, the VNSAs might be expected to include a myriad of pro-regime, neutral or self-interested armed actors. For instance, the process of state failure in Afghanistan had been preceded and accompanied not only by the emergence of multiple armed factions opposing the regime, but also of pro-regime paramilitaries, warlords with no clear political affiliation, drug traffickers and smugglers, as well as of tribal and clan militias .[lvi]

In fragile states, the congregation of pro-regime VNSAs is often disregarded as an actual threat to statehood and associated either with an increase of criminality,[lvii] or with temporary security gaps.[lviii] Unlike those armed actors that remain in clear opposition to or in firm support of the government, the bulk of VNSAs are susceptible to shifts in their allegiances and loyalties. Economic factors or the regime's inability to satisfy the informal veto-players may result in the dramatic change of balance and in transformation of VNSAs either into political opposition or in regime-affiliated "troublemakers." As the numbers and strength of VNSAs existing outside of direct state control increase vis-à-vis the government, so are their chances to either challenge the regime or to simply undermine it from within. All of the above significantly inflates the likelihood of state failure. Since establishing causal relationships in this setting is difficult, this analysis instead focuses on the correlational effect of VNSAs. Hence:

> *H2: The presence of multiple violent non-state actors – instead of or along with rebel groups – increases the likelihood of state failure.*

As expected in H2, not all VNSAs oppose the regime and directly confront it. Many armed extra-state actors may actually side with the government or even support it. Notwithstanding their pro-regime stance, these VNSAs might still precipitate state failure by appropriating the

state monopoly on violence and by de-formalising security provision. Amongst other VNSAs, pro-government militias[lix] (PGMs) have been described as the most powerful and influential extra-state pro-regime actors, active in both fragile and failed states.[lx] Governments are known to delegate their monopoly on violence to PGMs in order to avoid accountability for violence and to sub-contract "dirty jobs" of persecuting their civilian opponents and committing human rights violations to non-state actors with pro-regime loyalties.[lxi] The literature on PGMs identifies militias as key perpetrators of genocides,[lxii] sexual violence,[lxiii] mass civilian victimisation,[lxiv] and other forms of extreme violence against the population. Research on PGMs has demonstrated that militias are employed by governments not only as principal agents of counterinsurgency,[lxv] or as civilian defence forces during the episodes of civil war violence, but also as "death squads" and vigilante groups used to persecute political opposition in times of peace. A study by Carey et al.[lxvi] has found that over half of all PGMs emerge and function in countries not affected by civil violence.

The deployment of PGMs by incumbents is not directly associated with failed states. Instead, as argued by Mazzei[lxvii], governments of fragile (failing) states have been known to rely on militias even more than political regimes in failed (collapsed) states. For example, the use of PGMs was widespread in Sudan, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Haiti and Yugoslavia in times of state fragility. While the role of such VNSAs as criminal networks might be restricted to basic and relatively small-scale threats to the law and order (for example Mexican drug cartels), the PGM-perpetrated violence might encourage a widespread domestic anarchy. The use of indiscriminate violence by pro-regime militias is known to increase opposition to the government and either incite a rebellion or to encourage support for already functioning political opposition.[lxviii] The deployment of PGMs by the regime may also radicalise the opposition and convince it in the need to rely on violence as the only viable option in dealing with the regime. Hence, the PGMs in fragile states can be potential catalysts of state failure and the precursors of civil violence. Even those fragile states that did not descend into civil violence, or managed to terminate their civil conflicts, might still be weakened by the presence of militias. For instance, the existence of Hezbollah militias in Lebanon, along with other armed extra-state groups, contributed to the continuous state failure well after the end of Lebanese civil war in the 1990s. In a similar vein, the growth of militias in pre-2015 civil war Yemen, preceded the collapse of the government and encouraged the start of civil war. Thus:

H3: The presence of pro-government militias – as a type of VNSAs – increases the likelihood of state failure.

Data and variables

The state failure is the outcome variable of this analysis. Previous research on failed states identifies over a dozen different measurement criteria and countless indicators of state failure.[lxix] The State Failure Task Force, the Fund for Peace, POLITY project, and the World Bank provide the most widely used definitions and databases of state failure. To differentiate between various stages of state failure this study relies on the State Fragility Index (SFI) designed by the Center for Systemic Peace (CSP). Periods of state fragility are defined here in terms of the CSP's measure of "high fragility" and the episodes of state failure are measured by the CSP's "extreme fragility." The CSP codes all nation states on a scale from 0 (no fragility) to 25 (extreme fragility) over a period from 1995 to 2014.[lxx] States are identified as highly fragile (15-20 points) as long as they do not cross the 20 point threshold, at which moment they enter the extreme fragility set and are classified as failed (20-25 points). The SFI is advantageous over other existing databases not only due to its cut-points, but also owing to its longer period coverage. For instance, the Fund for Peace database only covers a period from 2006 to 2014. A time-series dataset covers period from 1995 to 2014 and includes all nation-states existing as of 2015. Each country-year constitutes an observation. Another advantage of using SFI is due to the index's reliance on *transition stages* rather than on a static definition of failed state. For instance, the index codes the effectiveness of security, political and economic governance, as well as social stability, as observations rather than factors. Hence, the SFI provides the data that are least prone to endogeneity between independent variables (IVs) and the dependent variable (DV) than other state failure databases.

Civil war violence is the first independent variable. The data on civil war incidence is taken from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP)/Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) Armed Conflict Dataset v.4-2015. The UCDP/PRIO dataset contains information on all civil wars between 1946 and 2014. According to the UCDP/PRIO definition intrastate armed conflict is "a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths".[lxxi] Since the CSP does not control for civil conflict – but instead measures security vulnerability employing a broader term "armed conflict" – the possibility of endogeneity between civil war (IV) and "extreme fragility" (DV) is reduced.[lxxii]

To control for typology of civil violence, I introduce two dummies *ethnic conflict* and *sectarian violence*, designed upon similarly named variables from Fearon and Laitin.[lxxiii] Ethnic conflict variable allows distinguishing between ethnic, non-ethnic and mixed conflicts. The variable on sectarian violence controls for incidence of religion-related violence. As argued by Fearon and Laitin[lxxiv] both types of civil conflicts are associated with high levels of ethnic or religious fragmentation. Hence, I add ethnic and religious fractionalisation variables from Fearon and Laitin's[lxxv] original dataset. Given that these two variables allow to control for ethnicity and religion-related factors not only in conflict-affected countries, but also in states without the incidence of civil violence, they are particularly valuable for the analysis of state failure.

The second key explanatory variable is the presence of VNSAs. The data on VNSAs is borrowed from the UCDP Non-State Conflict Dataset (NSCD) v. 2.5-2015.[lxxvi] The NSCD lists all organised armed non-state groups[lxxvii] from 1946 to 2014. One notable shortcoming of the NSCD is that the database offers no information about distinctions between various types of VNSAs, which makes it hard to discern whether a VNSA is a pro-regime or anti-government group. To distinguish pro-regime groups, I rely on the Pro-Government Militia Database (PGMD), composed by Carey et al.[lxxviii] The PGMD offers detailed information on over 330 militia groups around the world.

A set of control variables is employed to account for levels of democracy, population size, GDP, oil production, and the terrain. Studies on failed states suggest that countries with lower level of democratic governance are more prone to fragility than consolidated democracies.[lxxix] To control for that assumption, I add a *democracy* dummy that draws on the Polity dataset and distinguishes between democracies (score 6 and above) and non-democracies (-6 or below). A log of population size is based on the World Bank data and is introduced to control for the proposition that populous countries are prone to state failure.[lxxx] Since much of the literature on failed states converges on the argument that low level of economic production is one of the key indicators of state failure, I introduce a log of real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita measured in thousands of constant 1996 U.S. dollars from the World Bank database. The impact of natural resources has often been cited as closely associated with state failure. In Clapham's[lxxxi] words: "Africa's principal oil-exporting countries has proved almost without exception to be dismal." In order to take into consideration the weight of natural resources, a measure of oil production was included from Ross.[lxxxii] The effect of terrain on state failure has been discussed in the literature only circumstantially. The rough terrain was presented as a challenge for the distribution of goods and services and effective regional development.[lxxxiii]

To test that proposition, a percentage of mountainous terrain was adopted from Fearon and Laitin.[lxxxiv] Lastly, a variable measuring percentage of Muslim population from Fearon and Laitin[lxxxv] was added to test whether state failure is more likely to occur in Muslim countries, as was theorised by Huntington.[lxxxvi]

Empirical analysis

The results of statistical tests are presented in Table 1. I begin with discussing the results for the first hypothesis, which posits that civil war violence does not increase the likelihood of state failure. In Model 3, I test the incidence of civil wars with all controls and the VNSA dummy included. Civil war coefficient is in positive direction, but it has no statistical significance. In Model 4, where I use the same set variables, but replacing VNSAs with militias, civil war variable remains insignificant. Controlling for specific types of civil violence reveals that while the sectarian violence variable produces negative results, ethnic violence can potentially affect the state failure. These findings show that although, as initially hypothesised, civil war has no significant effect on the process of state failure, in cases when civil violence occurs it is the ethnic conflict that has the highest impact on state collapse.

<Table 1.>

Extending the analysis through descriptive statistics renders additional support to H1. Only 43% of fragile states are affected by civil violence. By contrast, 75% of failed states host civil wars. Bearing in mind that only 33% of fragile states cross the threshold between fragility and failure, the probability of armed conflict in fragile states to precipitate state failure is fairly limited. Less than a quarter of conflict-affected fragile states actually fail. Instead the data strongly suggests that failed states descend into violence only after they fail. To provide further explanation on the role of civil violence, Model 2 estimates the same set of variables, but without the civil war violence. The significance of ethnic diversity increases, but religious divisions remain irrelevant. This suggests that in the absence of civil war, ethnic divisions have higher potential to weaken states than religious fractionalisation.

H2 expects that the presence of VNSAs in fragile states is conducive to state failure. The VNSA variable is strongly statistically significant in Models 2 and 3, indicating that violent non-state actors have a high possibility of inflating the risk of state failure. Since the

significance of VNSAs increases in model without civil war variable, the probability of VNSAs to impact state failure appears to be notably higher in countries without ongoing civil violence. Descriptive statistics show that in 40% of observations the presence of VNSAs does not coincide with civil war incidence and almost in 70% of fragile states VNSAs functioned during episodes of peace; VNSAs were present in 47% of all fragile states and in 84% of all failed states.

H3 predicts that of all other VNSAs it is the presence of pro-regime militias that encourages state failure. In Model 4, militias are highly statistically significant. A closer look at the dataset reveals that only in 43% of observations the presence of PGMs coincides with civil war incidence. Hence, while PGMs are conducive to state failure, their presence is not always associated with civil violence. The addition of VNSAs and PGMs to the last two models notably increases the model fit, as evidenced by lower AIC.

The findings related to controls produce a number of statistically significant findings. Democracy and the real GDP per capita consistently remain in negative direction, as expected in other studies on failed states. Population size is positive and significant. Oil production is irrelevant across all models. Rough terrain is important in models without civil war factors, but becomes insignificant with the inclusion of civil violence. The presence of large Muslim population has significant effect in all models.

To expand the analysis, a variable controlling for peace years, along with three cubic splines, was introduced. As shown in Table 1, peace years produce negative results, suggesting that the number of peace years has poor relationship with state failure. Amongst three cubic splines for specific thresholds in peace periods, only cases with short peace spells in Model 4 with PGM presence produce noteworthy results.

<Figure 1>

To visualise the interpretation of these findings, I estimate the probabilities of association between civil wars, VNSAs and state failure (Figure 1). These results confirm the theoretical assumption on weak association between civil war violence and state failure and much stronger markedly vertical relationship between the presence of VNSAs and state failure.

Conclusion

This article examined the impact of civil war violence and the presence of VNSAs on the phenomenon of state failure. Challenging the well-established in literature on failed states linkage between armed conflict and state failure, this study argued that the existence of armed pro-regime veto-players has higher effect on state failure than the incidence of civil violence. Statistical tests revealed that while the vast majority of failed states are affected by armed conflicts, less than half of fragile or failing states host ongoing civil conflicts. These findings suggest that although failed states are highly susceptible to armed conflict, the state failure does not occur exclusively, or predominantly due to armed violence. The quantitative analysis shows that a high percentage of failing states reach the threshold of failure without succumbing to civil war. Following the state failure and the state's loss of capacity to provide human security, the chances of a state to become engulfed by civil violence dramatically increase.

The presence of VNSAs in fragile states – even in countries unaffected by violence – emerges as particularly conducive to state failure. In its analysis of VNSAs, this study has aimed to shift the focus from rebel groups and other anti-regime actors towards those elements of non-state forces, which either support the regime or remain neutral. It was argued that pro-regime veto-players are as prone to weaken fragile states as regime opponents. As a matter of fact, the plurality of regimes with the experience of state failure hosted one or more violent non-state actors prior to the moment of failure. The presence of VNSAs in failing states is not accidental; their numbers and influence increase with the decrease of state capacities. VNSAs also function as precursors of armed conflict. Following the descent of a failed state in civil war, VNSAs shift sides and change alliances, constantly manoeuvring in the chaotic environment of war-torn countries.

This study contributes to research on failed states by emphasising the role of alternative explanations of state failure. The shift from the armed conflict paradigm – prioritised in numerous studies on failed states – towards closer and more nuanced analysis of the actors of failure opens new prospects for research on failed states and improves our understanding of the VNSAs' role in state destabilisation processes. The focus on the diversity of armed actors particularly in states on the verge of collapse offers prospects for conflict prevention, state-building and peace-making. It also casts a fresh glance on the relationship between a fragile nation-state and extra-state actors, which in many failing states tends to evolve towards higher levels of symmetry and even towards the transformation of roles and functions.

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[i] According to the Center for Systemic Peace, Nigeria was listed as a high fragility (failed state) case since the early 1990s and before the start of Niger Delta conflict. It has left the "failed states' club" following the election of Olusegun Obasanjo government in 1999 and, in spite of ranging civil violence in the Niger Delta, and more recent Boko Haram insurgency, has not re-entered the category of fragile, or failing states.

[ii] Tilly, "War making."

[iii] Coyne, "Reconstructing"; Helman and Ratner, "Saving failed."

[iv] Ghani and Lockhart, "Fixing failed."

[v] Rotberg, *When States Fail*; Malejacq, "Warlords."

[vi] Malejacq, "Warlords."

[vii] Carey et al., "States," 252.

[viii] Gros, "Towards a taxonomy."

[ix] Iqbal and Starr, "Bad neighbours," 317.

[x] Vinci, "Anarchy," 298.

[xi] Call, "Beyond the 'failed state'."

[xii] Rotberg, *When States Fail.*

[xiii] Rotberg, *When States Fail*, 2-14.

[xiv] Kraxberger, "Failed states."

[xv] Rotberg, *When States Fail*, 11.

[xvi] Bilgin and Morton, "From 'Rogue."

[xvii] Rotberg, *When States Fail*.

[xviii] Nay, "Fragile."

[xix] Vinci, "Anarchy."

[xx] Rotberg, *State Failure*, 5.
[xxi] Iqbal and Starr, "Bad neighbours," 318.
[xxii] DeRouen et al., "Civil war."
[xxiii] Newman, "Failed states."
[xxiv] Kasfir, "Domestic anarchy."
[xxv] Hendrix, "Measuring state"; Thies, "Of rulers."
[xxvi] Call "Beyond the 'failed state'."
[xxvii] Vinci, "Anarchy," 296.
[xxviii] Kasfir, "Domestic anarchy."
[xxix] Rotberg, *When States Fail*.
[xxx] Rotberg, *When States Fail*, 15.
[xxxi] Hill, "Beyond the other."
[xxxii] Piazza, "Incubators of terror"; Hehir, "The myth"; Simons and Tucker, "The misleading problem."
[xxxiii] See Coggins, "Does state failure"; Piazza, "Incubators of terror".
[xxxiv] Newman, "Weak states."
[xxxv] Marten, "Warlordism."
[xxxvi] Marten, "Warlordism."
[xxxvii] Malejacq, "Warlords."
[xxxviii] Klare, "The deadly connection," 116.
[xxxix] Klare, "The deadly connection," 116.
[xl] Carey et al., "Governments."
[xli] Ahram, *Proxy Warriors*; Mazzei, *Death Squads*.
[xlii] Klare, "The deadly connection."
[xliii] Vinci, "Anarchy," 296.
[xliv] Waltz, *Theory*.
[xlv] Josselin and Wallace, *Non-state actors*, 3.
[xlvi] Vinci, "Anarchy," 299.
[xlvii] Bures, "Private military."
[xlviii] Rotberg, *When States Fail*, 3-14.
[xlix] Ghani and Lockhart, "Fixing."
[l] See Uppsala Conflict Database Program at http://ucpd.uu.se.
[li] Malejacq, "Warlords."
[lii] Carey et al., "Governments."
[liii] Rotberg, *When States Fail*.
[liv] Vandewalle, "After Qaddafi."
[lv] Kalyvas, *The Logic*.
[lvi] Kilcullen, *The accidental guerrilla.*
[lvii] Shirk and Wallman, "Understanding Mexico's."
[lviii] Newman, "Failed states."
[lix] The definition of pro-government militias (PGMs) is borrowed from Carey et al., who classify as a PGM any group that: (1) is pro-government, or sponsored by the state; (2) exists outside regular security forces; (3) armed; and (4) organised. See Carey et al. "States," 250.
[lx] Aliyev, "Strong militias"; Ahram, *Proxy Warriors*; Souleimanov et al. "Defectd"; Nussio, "How ex-combatants."
[lxi] Mitchell et al., "The Impact."
[lxii] Ahram, "Pro-government militias."
[lxiii] Cohen and Nordås, "Do states."

[lxiv] Stanton, "Regulating militias."
[lxv] Souleimanov and Aliyev, "Evaluating."
[lxvi] Carey et al. "States."
[lxvii] Mazzei, *Death Squads*, 12-14.
[lxviii] Kalyvas, "Armed Collaboration."
[lxix] Iqbal and Starr, "Bad neighbours," 316.
[lxx] See details on the SFI coding and methodology at http://www.systemicpeace.org/.
[lxxi] UCDP, "Battle-related deaths," 4.
[lxxii] The SFI codes "armed conflict" as "Total Residual War" presented as a measure of "general security and vulnerability to political violence" (SFI, 2015). Hence, coding does not take into consideration the presence of armed groups.
[lxxiii]Fearon and Laitin, "Ethnicity."
[lxxiv] Fearon and Laitin, "Ethnicity," 83-84.
[lxxv] Fearon and Laitin, "Ethnicity."
[lxxvi] Sundberg et al., "Introducing."
[lxxvii] The NSCD defines non-state groups as "any non-governmental group of people having announced a name for their group and using armed force against another similarly formally organized group." See Sundberg et al., "Introducing," 2.
[lxxviii] Carey et al., "States."
[lxxix] Rotberg, *When States Fail*; Kraxberger, "Failed states."
[lxxx] Clapham, "The global-local," 87.
[lxxxi] Clapham, "The global-local," 89.
[lxxxii] Ross, "Oil and gas."
[lxxxiii] Buhaug et al., "Geography."
[lxxxiv] Fearon and Laitin, "Ethnicity."
[lxxxv] Fearon and Laitin, "Ethnicity."
[lxxxvi] Huntington, "The Clash."